

The Very Best Of

JOHNNY "GUITAR" WATSON



"Johnny had a whole, clear image of music, plus a distinctive sound and feeling all his own. He knew gutbucket, he knew Monk—the man knew it all."

—*Jimmie Vaughan*

1. **SPACE GUITAR** - Young John Watson
2. **MOTOR HEAD BABY** - Chuck Higgins & His Mellotones
 3. **HIGHWAY 60** - Young John Watson
 4. **MOTORHEAD BABY** - Young John Watson
 5. **I GOT EYES** - Young John Watson
6. **YOU CAN'T TAKE IT WITH YOU** - Young John Watson
7. **HOT LITTLE MAMA** - Johnny "Guitar" Watson
 8. **TOO TIRED** - Johnny "Guitar" Watson
9. **THREE HOURS PAST MIDNIGHT** - Johnny "Guitar" Watson
 10. **THE EAGLE IS BACK** - Johnny Watson
 11. **CUTTIN' IN** - Johnny (Guitar) Watson
 12. **BROKE AND LONELY** - Johnny "Guitar" Watson
13. **THAT'S THE CHANCE YOU'VE GOT TO TAKE** - Johnny Watson
 14. **COLD, COLD HEART** - Johnny Watson
 15. **IN THE EVENING** - Johnny Watson
 16. **GANGSTER OF LOVE** - Johnny Watson
17. **THOSE LONELY, LONELY NIGHTS** - Johnny "Guitar" Watson
 - * 18. **THE LATE FREIGHT TWIST** - Floyd Dixon

* Previously unissued



"SPACE GUITAR," "MOTORHEAD BABY," "HIGHWAY 60," "I GOT EYES," "YOU CAN'T TAKE IT WITH YOU," "CUTTIN' IN," "BROKE AND LONELY," "THAT'S THE CHANCE YOU'VE GOT TO TAKE," "COLD, COLD HEART," "IN THE EVENING," and "GANGSTER OF LOVE" licensed from Global Licensing Co. • "MOTOR HEAD BABY" licensed from Ace Records Ltd. • "HOT LITTLE MAMA," "TOO TIRED," "THOSE LONELY LONELY NIGHTS," and "THREE HOURS PAST MIDNIGHT" licensed from Virgin Records America Inc. • "THE LATE FREIGHT TWIST PART 1" licensed from Floyd Dixon.

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About six months ago, here at Rhino, I received a list of projects to begin working on. As I scanned the list, I saw that *Blues Masters: The Very Best Of Johnny "Guitar" Watson* was approved and needed to be compiled. Excited, I called Jimmie Vaughan. Jimmie exclaimed, "He's my *@!#%^& hero!" If you want to hear a bad-ass tribute to one mean guitarist, just check out Jimmie's version of "Motorhead Baby" on his latest CD. It's new and old at the same time.

Johnny had a profound effect on people who saw him perform. I remember being seated with him at the 1996 Pioneer Awards, sponsored by the R&B Foundation. He played with the kind of spirit that one has at a young age. Only thing is, he was then 60 years old. Before I left the event, I leaned over to Johnny and whispered, "'Space Guitar' is one of the greatest records ever made." He gave me an ear-to-ear grin, the kind of smile that says, "Thanks, man. I'm glad you dig my shit."

For this collection, Jimmie and I assembled the best of Johnny's blues years. We hope it will serve as an introduction to one of the best bluesmen ever to grab hold of a guitar.

—James Austin
Rhino A&R

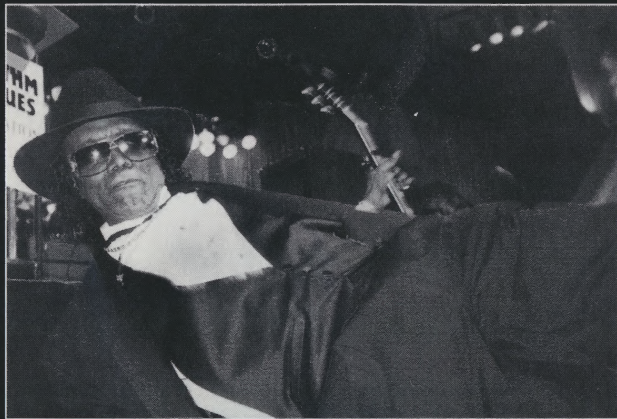


Photo: STEPHEN K. PEPPER

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istory can be cruel. Historians, like all human beings, make mistakes. Chroniclers of this country's popular music are particularly prone to error, I believe, because the art form is relatively new and especially subject to passing fashion. The canon of rock-solid books on African-American music is sparse. And even such accepted masterworks as Arnold Shaw's encyclopedic *Honkers And Shouters* miss the mark when it comes to the seminal subject of this fabulous compilation. In the 528 pages of Shaw's text, subtitled *The Golden Years Of Rhythm And Blues*, Johnny "Guitar" Watson's name is never mentioned, not even as a footnote.

So let the record show that there are serious students of soul music who consider Watson a figure of critical importance in the evolution of blues-based music. Many put him in the same company as other pioneers—Ike Turner and Little Richard, Bo Diddley and Chuck Berry, Ray Charles and James Brown. This disc concentrates on Watson's early period, when his reputation as a bluesman was first forged. Four decades later, Johnny remains an unheralded hero, a man whose talents jumped over genres to influence a group of imitators and emulators who, ironically, would gain more fame than the man they revered. I'm thinking of Etta James, Sly Stone, Jimi Hendrix, and Stevie Ray Vaughan, to name but a few.

"I got everything from Johnny," Etta James told me when I first met her in the late '70s. "My base was gospel, but this whole business of singing blues and rhythm & blues came from Johnny and the days I traveled with him on the road. He was my main model. He taught me how to squawl, taught me how to phrase. My whole ballad style comes from imitating his ballad style—the way he combined pop with blues. He was the baddest and the best. Johnny could pick up any instrument and make it sound like modern jazz. We once bought him one of those little ol' recorders, a toylike instrument on the order of a Flute-aphone. Well, he took that thing and starting playing bebop all over it. Sounded like Bird.

"Don't get me wrong—Johnny wasn't just a killer guitarist; the man was a master musician. He could call out charts; he could write him a beautiful melody or a nasty groove at the drop of a hat; he could lay on the harmonies and he could come up with a whole sound. They call Elvis The King, but the sure-enough king was Johnny 'Guitar' Watson."

I met Johnny two years before he died. It was 1994, and he was performing at a convention of independent record labels in a West Hollywood hotel. We sat in the lobby and spoke as passersby looked over their shoulders to catch a second glance of him. They were certain he was someone they should recognize, but none did. He was dressed in white from head to toe—wide-brimmed floppy white fedora, tight three-piece white suit, white-on-white big-collared shirt, gleaming white

Photo: MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES, VENICE, CA



boots. His extravagant, gold-framed sunglasses were enormous against his thin face. Gold necklaces adorned his chest and fat diamonds flashed from his fingers. He appeared to be in great shape, energetic and eager to talk. As he sat across from me, I saw Johnny as the last of the super-bad soul stars. I was excited to be in his company. His aura was radiant, his charisma palpable. He smiled when he spoke, and he spoke rapidly and with quick-witted intelligence. I loved his friendly manner and warm way with words.

"I was born in '35," he said, "and my growing-up days in Houston were the '40s. The '40s were jumping. But even before I saw cats like Clarence 'Gatemouth' Brown, I'd been listening to my own daddy play boogie-woogie on piano. Daddy could burn. He showed me around the keyboard. Guitar came quick to me. Actually came from my granddaddy, who was a preacher and made me swear not to play no blues. But blues was the first thing I played. Both on sax and guitar. See, I came up at a time when T-Bone was ruling the roost. I saw T-Bone in Dallas and saw him when I moved

to L.A. in the early '50s. T-Bone had all that flash and fire, which I wanted. T-Bone did the splits, played the guitar over his head, with his teeth—I mean, no limits whatsoever. Lots of rhythm & blues stars were lighting the sky over L.A.—Lowell Fulson, Amos Milburn, Roy Brown—but I was also into jazz. Always into jazz. Everyone was playing around L.A.—Bird and Dizzy, Dexter Gordon and Wardell Gray. The town was jumping, and I came up with something they started calling 'jump jazz.' Or maybe they called it 'jump blues.' Doesn't matter. It was just good music. To me, it was the start of modern music. Made up of a little Louis Jordan, a little Gatemouth, a little T-Bone, and a whole lotta Johnny 'Guitar' Watson. Back then they were calling me 'Young' John Watson, 'cause I was too young to be so bad."

Watson was one of the first bad boys, a radically different character, say, than Louis Jordan or T-Bone Walker, who stuck to the role of ingratiating entertainer. For all their brilliant talent and musical innovations, they were not threats to the status quo. Johnny was. He had a sound and swagger rooted in strong self-confidence. He was cocky, a man's man whose great theme was his magnetism for women. He represented a new age and defined a new ghetto hero. Unapologetic, ready to rock, he was the original Gangster of Love, as his most famous song asserts.

"I knew what I could do and couldn't do," he said. "Much as I loved the bluesmen who came before me, I knew I was different from them. Different in that I was more aggressive about my talent. Knew I could play and knew I could excite the ladies. Didn't mind boasting about it either. Boasting became part of the song and part of who I was. Not a nasty boast, mind you, but a friendly boast. A boast that said I could deliver the goods. And I did."

Watson displayed a good half-dozen different styles in the course of his career. He was Chuck Higgins' piano player on the first version of "Motor Head Baby." His Federal records in the first half of the '50s are prime examples of early R&B. It wasn't until later in that period that Johnny switched to the guitar.

"I'd been running over to New Orleans a lot and hanging out with cats like Guitar Slim," he remembered, referring to the virtuoso whose immortal "The Things I Used To Do" was famously produced by Ray Charles. "Now Slim was deadly. You didn't wanna fuck with Slim. Had him a long cord that let him wander through the crowd and out into the street. Slim took it a little further than T-Bone. Burned that guitar till it went up in smoke. I saw what Slim was up to and figured I could do the same. Liked his fire and flash. Truth is, it got to a point where we'd gig together and march into the club with me carrying him on my shoulders, both us firing away on our guitars like World War III. But I did Slim one better. Got me a 200-foot cord, so when I played auditoriums, I'd start in the back of the balcony and work my way down. I could see rock 'n' roll coming, and I could see that when it came in, it'd be riding on the back of some flame-eating guitar. Well, hell, by

then Guitar was my middle name."

Cut in 1954, "Space Guitar" was, like a Googie coffee shop or an Olds Rocket 88, a sleek symbol of the modern age, looking to the future as it co-opted the past. Johnny's sense of distortion and feedback were well ahead of his time. "I'd play with my teeth," he said, "I'd play standing on my hands, play it over my head and under my legs. See, the technology was changing. I was fooling with overdubbing, I was looking at these Stratocaster guitars and Fender amps and reverbing like crazy. I was seeing all these new sounds I could create. Sounds the kids liked, and sounds that still had the funky feeling I'd gotten when I was playing with Amos Milburn or Bumps Blackwell. I think I was the link between the old and the new. I wasn't afraid to take it a little further and see where it went."

Watson went to the Modern label, where he joined forces with maestro Maxwell Davis, the man behind B.B. King's lean and clean charts of the same period. "I learned a lot from Davis about how to use a studio," Watson remembered. "And I think Davis learned something from me about how to match the

sounds—the sound of my guitar and the sound of my voice."

That voice was mesmerizing. Johnny could sing straight-up blues—listen to his "Three Hours Past Midnight" (only tics away from B.B.'s "3 O' Clock Blues")—and the Louisiana blues ballad style of Earl King's "Those Lonely, Lonely Nights." As a singer, Johnny had versatility, humor, power, and, most importantly, a distinct persona. He came on strong, unifying deep-country feeling with big-city slick. He screamed and squawled but always over harmonic changes far more sophisticated than most of his colleagues'.

"Johnny was clever," Art Neville of The Meters and Neville Brothers recently told me. "He was a clever guitarist and a clever singer. He'd turn a song around to examine it from the back and the side. He had his own angle."

"Don't forget," Jimmie Vaughan explained, "that Johnny was not just a guitarist but a pianist and saxophonist as well. He had it all in his head, all the sounds he needed to make an original mark."

If he lacked the poetic genius, say, of Chuck Berry, whose lyrics

Photo: BILL MILLER

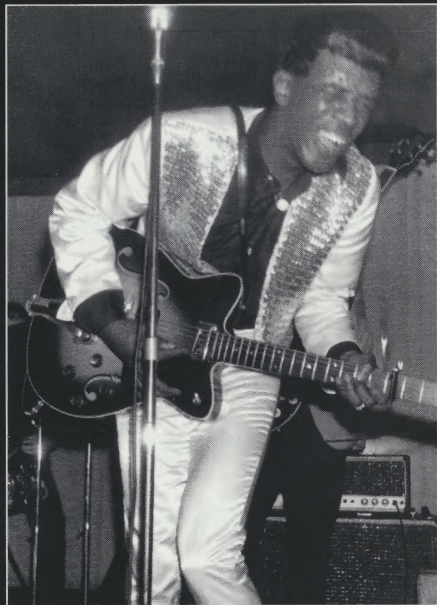
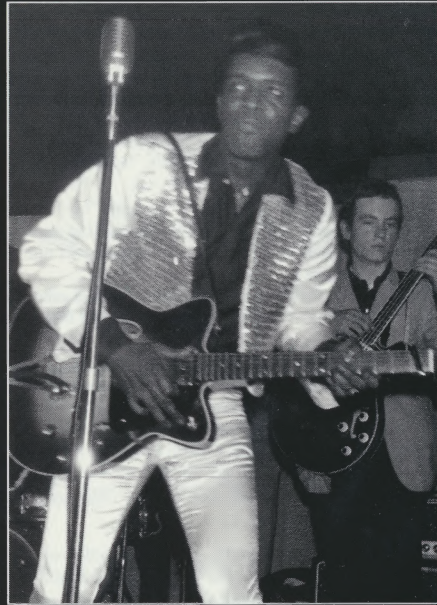


Photo: BILL MILLER



linked the world of white teens to the cadence of R&B, Watson had a solid grasp of metaphor. "Motorhead Baby," for example, combines high speed and hot sex, a marriage of two of young America's favorite preoccupations. The fact that Johnny didn't reach the level of Chuck or Bo Diddley or Little Richard may be due only to the absence of a megahit in an era—the strangely segregated '60s—when crossover was bestowed upon precious few.

When it came to personalities, Johnny met his match when he joined forces with Larry Williams. Another undervalued pioneer, Williams had a short string of hits in the '50s—"Just Because," "Short Fat Fannie," "Bony Moronie"—before fading out in the '60s. The two friends became partners in musical (and, according to some, extra-musical) crime, touring and recording together for years as L.A.'s answer to Sam & Dave.

Later in the '60s and all through the '70s, Johnny reinvented himself as an outrageous funkster. It was more expansion than reinvention, since outrageousness and funk had always been part of his musical identity. The great funksters to follow—Sly Stone, George Clinton, Rick James, and Prince—each recognized Watson's towering influence.

When I saw him in the '90s, he was set for still another reinvention. Musical rebirth was Johnny's one and only strategy for survival.

"People think I'm back," he said, "but I've never been away. Made some mistakes, but who the hell hasn't? Went a little over the top, but music is always over the top. Least the kind I like."

I wondered if he harbored resentments against writers who excluded him from the pantheon of pioneers.

"The writers don't know who the real cats are. Only other cats know that. They'll tell you. They'll testify. They'll let you know who shaped their souls. Look, man, I came up at a time when, far as music goes, you couldn't fuck around. You either knew how to play or not; you either could sing or not. There was no faking the shit. The people who heard me then, heard me good and loud. I made my impression, and no book can change that fact."

This collection of the early blues-tinged masterpieces of Johnny "Guitar" Watson more than justifies his sense of self-worth.

When he died of a heart attack on May 17, 1996, onstage at the Blues Café in Yokohama, Japan, Watson was 61, his musical heroism intact. "John will be remembered," said Herb Alpert, who first worked with him back in 1957 and thought he was a genius. "The man found a little funk in everything."

—David Ritz

David Ritz is working on memoirs with Aretha Franklin as well as the Neville Brothers. He has written books on Ray Charles, B.B. King, Etta James, Jerry Wexler, Smokey Robinson, and Marvin Gaye.

1. **SPACE GUITAR - Young John Watson**
(Johnny Watson)
Recorded in Los Angeles (1954) • Johnny "Guitar" Watson: *vocals, guitar* • Devonia Williams: *piano* • Bill Gaither: *tenor sax* • Mario Delagarde: *bass* • Charles Prendergraff: *drums* • Produced by Ralph Bass • Federal single #12175 (1954)
2. **MOTOR HEAD BABY - Chuck Higgins & His Mellotones**
(Johnny Watson/Mario Delagarde)
Recorded in Los Angeles (1952) • Johnny "Guitar" Watson: *vocals, piano* • Chuck Higgins: *tenor sax* • Eli Toney: *drums* • Joe Urserly: *bass* • Produced by Jake Porter • Combo single #12 (1952)
3. **HIGHWAY 60 - Young John Watson**
(Johnny Watson)
Recorded in Los Angeles (1953) • Johnny "Guitar" Watson: *vocals, guitar* • Wayne Bennett: *guitar* • Billy Smith: *tenor sax* • Clyde Dunn: *baritone sax* • Mario Delagarde: *bass* • Bill English: *drums* • Produced by Ralph Bass • Federal single #12143 (1953)
4. **MOTORHEAD BABY - Young John Watson**
(Johnny Watson/Mario Delagarde)
Recorded in Los Angeles (1953) • Johnny "Guitar" Watson: *vocals, guitar* • Wayne Bennett: *guitar* • Billy Smith: *tenor sax* • Clyde Dunn: *baritone sax* • Mario Delagarde: *bass* • Bill English: *drums* • Produced by Ralph Bass • Federal single #12131 (1953)
5. **I GOT EYES - Young John Watson**
(Johnny Watson)
Recorded in Los Angeles (1953) • Johnny "Guitar" Watson: *vocals, guitar* • Harold Grant: *guitar* • Joe Bridgewater: *trumpet* • Edward Hale: *alto sax* • Milt Bradford, Sammy Parker & "Big" Jim Wynn: *tenor sax* • Billy Hadnott: *bass* • Robert "Snake" Sims: *drums* • Produced by Ralph Bass • Federal single #12143 (1953)
6. **YOU CAN'T TAKE IT WITH YOU - Young John Watson**
(Johnny Watson)
Recorded in Los Angeles (1954) • Johnny "Guitar" Watson: *vocals, guitar* • Devonia Williams: *piano* • Bill Gaither: *tenor sax* • Mario Delagarde: *bass* • Charles Prendergraff: *drums* • Produced by Ralph Bass • Federal single #12183 (1954)
7. **HOT LITTLE MAMA - Johnny "Guitar" Watson**
With Maxwell Davis Orchestra
(Johnny Watson/Maxwell Davis)
Recorded in Los Angeles (1955) • Johnny "Guitar" Watson: *vocals, guitar* • Rene Hall: *guitar* • Willard McDaniel: *piano* • James Parr: *trumpet* • Maxwell Davis: *tenor sax* • "Big" Jim Wynn: *baritone sax* • Billy Hadnott: *bass* • Jesse Price: *drums* • Produced by Joe Bihari • RPM single #423 (1955)

8. **TOO TIRED** - Johnny "Guitar" Watson
(Sam Ling/Maxwell Davis/Johnny Watson)
Recorded in Los Angeles (1955) • Johnny "Guitar" Watson: *vocals, guitar* • Rene Hall: *guitar* • Willard McDaniel: *piano* • James Parr: *trumpet* • Maxwell Davis: *tenor sax* • "Big" Jim Wynn: *baritone sax* • Billy Hadnott: *bass* • Jesse Price: *drums* • Produced by Joe Bihari • RPM single #431 (1955)
9. **THREE HOURS PAST MIDNIGHT** - Johnny "Guitar" Watson
(Johnny Watson)
Recorded in Los Angeles (1955) • Johnny "Guitar" Watson: *vocals, guitar* • Willard McDaniel: *piano* • Maxwell Davis: *tenor sax* • Jewell Grant: *baritone sax* • Ralph Hamilton: *bass* • Jesse Sailes: *drums* • Produced by Joe Bihari • RPM single #455 (1956)
10. **THE EAGLE IS BACK** - Johnny Watson
(Johnny Watson)

- Recorded in Los Angeles (1961) • Johnny "Guitar" Watson: *vocals, guitar* • Other personnel unknown • Producer unknown • Escort single #106 (1961)
11. **CUTTIN' IN** - Johnny (Guitar) Watson
(Johnny Watson)
Recorded in Los Angeles (1961) • Johnny "Guitar" Watson: *vocals, guitar* • Howard Roberts: *guitar* • Ernie Freeman: *piano* • Ted Brinson: *bass* • Ed "Sharkey" Hall: *drums* • Israel Baker, Elliott Fisher, Harry Hyams, Leonard Malarsky & Sydney Sharp: *strings* • Produced by Johnny Otis • King single #5579 (1961)
12. **BROKE AND LONELY** - Johnny "Guitar" Watson
(Johnny Otis/Johnny Watson)
Recorded in Los Angeles (1961) • Johnny "Guitar" Watson: *vocals, guitar* • Charles Norris: *guitar* • Robert Gross: *piano* • Robert Taylor: *trumpet* • James Benson & Chaune Lockie: *tenor sax* • Gaynel Hodge: *drums* • Produced by Johnny Otis • King single #5579 (1961)

13. **THAT'S THE CHANCE YOU'VE GOT TO TAKE** - Johnny Watson
With Johnny Otis Orchestra
(Johnny Watson)
Recorded in Los Angeles (1962) • Johnny "Guitar" Watson: *vocals, guitar* • Other personnel unknown • Produced by Johnny Otis • King single #5716 (1962)
14. **Cold, Cold Heart** - Johnny Watson
With Johnny Otis Orchestra
(Hank Williams)
Recorded in Los Angeles (1962) • Johnny "Guitar" Watson: *vocals, guitar* • Other personnel unknown • Produced by Johnny Otis • King single #5716 (1962)
15. **IN THE EVENING** - Johnny Watson
With Johnny Otis Orchestra
(Leroy Carr)
Recorded in Los Angeles (1962) • Johnny "Guitar" Watson: *vocals, guitar* • Other personnel unknown • Produced by Johnny Otis • King single #5774 (1963)

16. **GANGSTER OF LOVE** - Johnny Watson
With Johnny Otis Orchestra
(Johnny Watson)
Recorded in Los Angeles (1963) • Johnny "Guitar" Watson: *vocals, guitar* • Other personnel unknown • Produced by Johnny Otis • King single #5774 (1963)
17. **THOSE LONELY, LONELY NIGHTS** - Johnny "Guitar" Watson
(Earl King/Johnny Vincent)
Recorded in Los Angeles (1963) • Johnny "Guitar" Watson: *vocals, guitar* • Other personnel unknown • Producer unknown • From the album *Johnny "Guitar" Watson*, King #857 (1963)
18. **THE LATE FREIGHT TWIST** - Floyd Dixon
(Floyd Dixon)
Recorded in Los Angeles (1962) • Johnny "Guitar" Watson: *guitar* • Floyd Dixon: *piano* • James Johnson: *bass* • Chuck Smith: *drums* • Produced by Floyd Dixon • Previously unissued

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Blues Fest: Modern Blues Of The '90s (#72193)
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